

Feel safe – promoting personal safety

Personal safety skills are one way to help children to be safe or know how to find safety. This factsheet talks about how to help children be safe from sexual assault.

Many parents and carers are concerned about the safety of children. This is a valid concern as statistics on sexual abuse show the issue is very real. Sexual abuse is against the law. It includes any sexual contact with a child and showing a child sexual acts or material.

Sexual abuse can happen to any child. Some children have a higher risk of being sexually abused. Children are not responsible for their own safety. It is part of our role as adults to prevent child sexual abuse. It is important for every child and family to learn personal safety skills.

Avoid talking about *stranger danger* to prevent sexual abuse of children. Perpetrators of sexual abuse and assault are most commonly people who are known to the victim/survivor because of their relationships or employment. Sometimes a person who is being abusive uses tricks or bribery or gets to know a child over a long time before they try to abuse the child. This is called grooming.

Let children know that it is never ok for another adult to touch or ask to see their private parts or to show them theirs, even if it is a person they know and like.

Parents and carers can reduce the risk of abuse. Giving children information and skills about personal safety can help.

Learning about personal safety includes:

- self esteem
- assertiveness
- body awareness
- understanding feelings
- understanding relationships
- identifying the rules about touch
- knowing what to do if the rules are broken

When to start

Children are never too young to learn about being safe and whom they can talk to if they need help. Children with a learning difficulty or disability can and should learn about personal safety from an early age.

How to help

- make time to talk
- make time to listen
- acknowledge feelings
- believe in and respect your child
- remind them that you are always there if they need you
- teach personal safety skills
- be persistent
- celebrate your child and let them know you love them

What to teach

Use the True Relationships & Reproductive Health's booklet, *I have the right to be safe*, to help teach the following topics:

Feelings

Help children to understand and recognise different feelings and how to talk about these feelings with someone they trust.

Bodies

Talk to children about the names and functions of both public and private body parts. It is important that they feel good about their body and know that their body belongs to them.

Types of touch

Children need to know about the many different types of touch in their lives and recognise whether a touch is a loving, friendly, helping, sexy or a NO touch. This can help them to know when they need to tell someone they trust about confusing touch.

Rules about touch

Teach children the rules about sexy touching. Knowing the rules helps children to be aware of their rights and responsibilities.

Warning signs

Teach children to know when their body tells them something is wrong. Help children to know how their body reacts at times of stress including scary, confusing and sad situations. When the body does this it gives warning signs such as the heart beating fast, sweating, crying and shaking.

What to do

Practice NO GO TELL with children. Teach them to be clear, loud and assertive when saying NO. Encourage them to GO to a safe place. Sometimes children are unable to say NO or GO to a safe place. Remind them that they can always TELL someone if something has happened.

Who to tell

Make a list of the people they can talk to and how they can contact them. Encourage them to keep telling until they feel safe.

Scenarios

Practice safety techniques using make believe situations, TV shows or children's stories. Ask them to say what they would do and how they would get help.

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Assertiveness

Support children to stand up for themselves. It is important that they learn how to make decisions and have real choices. Remember you are their best role model.

Giving information

Do not worry about giving too much information. Children will only take in as much information as they are able to understand.

Remember to be positive, factual and brief:

- Be positive by talking about their ability to be safe and focussing on strategies rather than consequences.
- Be factual. Children do not need to be fearful of monsters and all strangers.
- Keep it brief. Short, regular talks about personal safety are better than just a one off talk. Teach safety skills in everyday situations to reinforce information.

This factsheet is best used as part of a personal safety education program with the booklet, *I have the right to be safe*, available from our online shop, www.true.org.au

What to do if a child talks about sexual abuse

You can help by:

- not panicking or expressing shock or outrage as this may make the child think that they have done something wrong
- listening
- telling them that you believe them
- thanking them for telling you and saying that it was the right thing to do
- emphasising that whatever has happened was not their fault
- telling them that some people do bad things
- talking in private
- acknowledging that it is hard to talk about such things
- not giving promises that cannot be kept, for example, that you will not tell anyone or that you will stop it happening again
- contacting the appropriate support services

Not all children can or will tell you if something has happened. Often there are other signs or behaviours that may indicate abuse. Talk to support services if you suspect something has happened.

Remember to trust your own warning signs and seek help. If a child is assaulting others take it seriously. Be supportive and find out how you can best help them and stop abuse from happening again. Abuse is rarely a one off situation.

How to help yourself

It is important to seek support for yourself if your child has been sexually abused. It can be an extremely emotional and difficult time. It may help to talk to people you trust, gather information from support services and books and see a counsellor. Some people may seek help through police and legal services.

Where to get more help

Parent Line
1300 30 1300

Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women
07 3235 9999
1800 177 135

Policelink
131 444

Lifeline (24 hour crisis counselling)
13 11 14

Talera Family Child and Family Therapy Centre
07 3397 7287

Murrigunyah
(for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women)
07 3290 4254
www.murrigunya.org.au

Immigrant Women's Support Service
07 3846 3490

Australian Indigenous Health Info Net
www.healthinfolnet.ecu.edu.au

Talking families
(Qld Family and Child Commission)

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